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ABSTRACT

The dual purpose of this study was to identify president selection methods of 20 community colleges in six Western States, and to develop a "Guideline of Procedures for Hiring a Community College President." Personal interviews with trustees, faculty members, administrators, and in some cases, employees and students revealed marked diversity both within and between states regarding method and procedure of selection. The guideline discusses screening committee duties, action by the board of trustees, candidate visits to campus, and general principles to be observed. Some of the major conclusions regarding the selection of the community college president are: (1) the hiring of a college president is the most important job that a board of trustees will undertake; (2) the board of trustees of the college is legally responsible for the selection; (3) the total college community should be involved in developing a written policy of procedures; and (4) screening and rescreening of candidates is the most important technique. (RN)

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Final Report

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A GUIDELINE OF PROCEDURES FOR SELECTING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT

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Author's Abstract

The major purposes of the study were: (1) to identify the actual practices used to select presidents for about twenty community colleges in the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, and California, and (2) to develop a "Guideline of Procedures for Hiring a Community College President."

Nineteen colleges from six Western States were selected for the study. These colleges had full-time student populations ranging from 750 to 7,500.

The study was conducted during the fall quarter of the 1971-72 school year. Personal interviews were held at each college with a trustee, a faculty member, an administrator. In some cases a classified employee and student who had personally participated in the selection of their college president were interviewed.

Ten general principles were developed as guidelines for selection of community college presidents. Four of the major ones were:

1. The hiring of a college president is the most important job that a Board of Trustees will undertake.

2. The Board of Trustees of the college is legally responsible for the selection of a president.

3. The total college community should be involved in developing a written policy of procedures for selection of the community college president. Such procedures should be adopted by the Board of Trustees as a written college policy.

4. Screening and rescreening of candidates is the most important technique for selecting the community college president.

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A GUIDELINE OF PROCEDURES FOR

SELECTING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT

Introduction

The task of selecting and hiring a community college president seems to be recurring with increasing frequency during the past few years. Frederick deW. Bolman provides a vivid perspective of the magnitude of the problem and the objectives to be attained:

> Every year, some two hundred of America's colleges and universities must seek new presidents.[1] The task is one of the most important ever faced by an institution's board of trustees. It is also one of the most difficult: finding extraordinary leaders is not an easy enterprise, be it industrial, governmental, or academic. At a college or university, the difficulty is often compounded if the searchers--laymen, for the most part, more at home in business or industry than in academe--are undertaking such a task for the first time in their lives.[2]

The objective of the presidential selection process is the matching of a person and an institution, so that one meets the other's needs at a particular moment in history. . . .[3]

> The problem is intricate, and the selection process is a delicate art. Errors in judgment on the part of those making the choice can be costly, in both tangible and intangible ways. On occasion, in the histories of some colleges and universities, they have been disasterous. These are the sobering thoughts that are likely to crowd the minds of conscientious trustees as they consider the task that results from a president's resignation, retirement or death.[4]

The president of the college is accountable to many publics: Board, administration, faculty, students, classified staff, parents, general public, and state officials. The pressures exerted on the office from these sources are becoming increasingly intense and the turnover rate is increasing. In fact, the current average length of service by a community college president in Washington is only 4.1 years so most colleges can anticipate having to go through the selection process more frequently than in the past.

Even though there is virtual unanimity regarding the importance of the task and the systematic, objective and logical way in which the procedure should be carried out, actual practices, especially at the community college level, belie this. In point of fact, the selection procedures vary widely from institution to institution from time to time and are usually determined on a local basis. Almost everyone who has had any part of such a process vows that "next time it will be different"

but that is about as far as the attempt to systematize the selection procedure goes.

The literature in the field is quite meager and the most widely respected authorities in the field of community college education, such as Leland Medsker of the University of California at Berkeley and Lamar Johnson of U.C.L.A., touch on this subject only in a general way. In 1962, the American Council on Education's Commission on Administrative Affairs commissioned Dr. Frederick deW. Bolman as a consultant to formulate and direct a study in this area. The results of the inquiry were compiled into a book entitled How College Presidents are Chosen which was published by the American Council on Education in 1965.

In October, 1967, the Junior College Journal published an article by Richard W. Hostrop entitled "Interviewing Presidential Candidates." The article indicated 48 typical questions actually asked by board members of four different college districts in two states of three presidential candidates. The questions covered personal philosophy, posing of situations requiring an administrative decision, personal background, general awareness of contemporary world events and the philosophy of the junior college.[5]

All too often, the problem of selecting the president and the acrimony, which was invariably generated between board, administration and faculty, was cited as a major reason for lingering campus disharmony. There should be a better way to carry out such an important mission with a maximum of efficiency and cooperation and a minimum of in-house disruption and rancor.

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of this study was two-fold in nature: (1) to identify the actual practices used to select presidents for approximately twenty community colleges in the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, and California, and (2) develop a "Guideline of Procedures for Hiring a Community College President." The assumption was that every community college should have a clear written policy for the selection of its president. This policy should be adopted by the Board of Trustees with the approval of Board, administration, faculty, classified staff, and students when the campus is not directly involved in making their presidential selection.

Study Method and Procedure

The procedure employed was as follows: First, appointments were made with the president of each of the colleges selected for interview and arrangements were made to interview the college president, board members, faculty members, classified staff and students.

The structure of the interview was quite informal and non-threatening to the participants and complete confidentiality and anonymity of

the respondents was maintained. The interview itself sought to arrive at an answer to four general area questions. First, what were the methods employed in selecting the initial criteria for evaluating presidential applications? Indirectly, this question produced the range of qualifications deemed desirable in a community college president as well as the perceptions of the respondents concerning their involvement in the establishment of such criteria. Second, what methods and procedures were utilized to screen the initial applications to the point of extending invitations for personal interviews either on- or off-campus? Third, what were the methods employed to make the final selection and extend a contract? And fourth, what were the strengths and weaknesses in the current procedure as seen from the respective vantage points of each of those who participated?

The results of these interviews were compiled by state and by question to ascertain if any patterns of commonality existed and where divergent procedures existed.

Results of the Study

Although there were some common threads running through the replies regarding method and procedure, the dominant theme was marked diversity both within and between the states. It was also discovered that only two colleges had prepared and published a detailed set of guidelines to be followed in their acquisition of a president. The following remarks reflect the general concensus of opinion by all parties by question asked.

In order to select criteria for soliciting presidential applications, the usual technique was to have the incumbent president design the criteria brochure, sometimes in concert with outside consultants such as university professors of higher education specializing in the community college or the state director of a community college system. The Board of Trustees then approved the format and content of the brochure and it was sent to university placement offices, usually in the western United States, and to the presidents of community colleges. Other places included the American Association of Junior Colleges and junior college consultants.

The faculty, classified staff, students and, infrequently, the alumni became involved at the point when the initial group of applications and credentials needed to be screened to a select group of interviewees at most campuses. In some cases, the Board appointed the screening committee and in others the various groups elected a predetermined number of representatives to serve on the committee. The committee size varied widely. In one college the entire faculty senate screened applicants, several had 10-12 members representing the various campus groups, several had 5-6 members, and some had only the Board make the screening or a state director and a higher education consultant with the direct involvement of the State Board of Regents. The initial screening process was usually carried out on the college campus although the college where the Board conducted the screening itself, rented a suite of rooms in Los Angeles to carry out their deliberations. The number of candidates finally selected for personal interviews was also quite diverse. There were usually a series of progressively finer siftings, i.e., 25 to 5, 20 to 4, 13 to 6, 10 to 4, 10 to 3, 10 to 8 to 2, 6 to 3, and 5 to 2.

Some just made a single selection of the top 5 or 6 candidates. The recommended list of interviewees was then presented to the Board of Trustees, sometimes in priority order and others in alphabetical or random order. The Board then either rejected the list and sent it back to the screening committee for reconsideration or rejected the entire slate of applications or accepted the recommended list and extended invitations for personal interviews. The Board also retained the prerogative of adding names to the list which were not previously considered by the screening committee.

The majority of the colleges had the Board of Trustees solely conducting the interviews. The candidates were invited to the campus for a tour of the facilities and an informal, unstructured social hour and dinner interview with the Board. Some of the colleges allowed a time during the tour for faculty representatives to interview the aspirants. The wives of the two or three finalists were also invited to attend the tour and dinner session and were sometimes querried by the wives of the Board members and the Board itself regarding their attitudes toward assuming a community leadership role, their awareness of the nature of a community college presidency, and their desire to reside in that community, etc.

In a few instances, representatives of the Board traveled to the site of the applicant's previous employment to interview previous employers and colleagues about the candidate's qualifications. Seldom did any faculty, classified staff or student representative accompany them on these off-campus visitations. A few Boards made telephone calls to personal friends who knew the applicants and their work.

Once the finalists had been interviewed, the Board met in executive session to make its final selection and extend a contract offer. The salary was then negotiated directly between the selected applicant and the Board.

The perceived strengths and weaknesses varied according to the group being polled, i.e., Board, administration, faculty, classified staff or students. The Boards tended to feel that everyone had been involved in selecting the president but regretted that no written policy on selection procedure had been prepared prior to the crisis. In some cases it was felt that the size of the initial selection committee had been too large and unwieldy. They also felt that the unstructured interviews were poorly conducted and did not achieve the desired results because there had been little preplanning of the information sought from the man.

The most common faculty complaint was that they were merely used as window dressing and not really involved in the selection process except in a very perfunctory manner. This resulted in much suspicion, distrust and hostility between the Board and faculty which immediately generalized to the new president regardless of his qualifications.

The only other major complaint was the total expense required for the entire process and the fact that little provision had been made in the budget for these expenses. It was suggested that a negotiated line item be included in the budget as a contingency fund for hiring and replacement of administrative staff personnel.

Conclusions: A Guideline of Procedures for Selecting a Community College President

The general principles which follow are the result of the findings of the study plus the accumulated years of experience in dealing with such situations by both the project director and the associate director. These guides were not meant to be mutually exclusive nor exhaustive of all possible contingencies but rather to provide a skeletal framework that community colleges could refer to in setting up procedures on their own campus.

I. General Principles to be Observed

1. The Board of Trustees of the college is legally responsible for the selection of the president. In most states, such a statement is written into the law establishing the community colleges. Also, since the president is directly responsible to the Board and authorized by the Board to carry out established policies, it is reasonable that the Board be legally empowered to select such a person.

2. The hiring of a college president is the most important job that a Board of Trustees will undertake. The person they select for such a position is singularly responsible for all facets of the institutional operation and the very survival of the college could well depend on his decisions. Also, the president projects the college image to the local community, other colleges and the state. If the person is inappropriate for the job, the entire college will suffer, possibly in irreversible ways.

3. Procedures for selecting the community college president should be developed and adopted as a written college policy. This should be done when the college is in a period of "relative calm" and all facets of the college family should participate in its development. Such preplanning helps insure that the best possible document that is acceptable to all parties be created and will help avoid the conflict between Trustees and faculty which is likely to arise when such a policy formulation has not been prepared.

4. A vigorous attempt must be made to locate a president who will "fit" the college at its particular point of historical development. Therefore, the college professional staff should conduct a thorough study of the college's history, its present operational status and projected future to ascertain the most emergent needs. An awareness of these needs should guide the screening committee and the personal interviews. Additionally, the candidates to be considered should have personal qualities that "fit" with the environment of the community as well as the college.

5. A presidential selection screening committee should be used to assist the Board of Trustees in choosing their president. This committee should remain relatively small, not exceeding 9 members and preferably 7. The composition of the committee should include all facets of the college

and might be made up of the following representatives: 1 Board member (preferably the chairman), 2 faculty members (elected faculty association officers), 2 administrators (selected by the Board of Trustees), 1 classified staff person (elected by the classified staff), and 1 student (a student body officer). Finally, this committee should operate in strict confidence throughout the entire deliberations to avoid premature announcements and considerable embarrassment to the candidates and the college.

6. The candidates that are being considered for the position should be researched thoroughly before and after their interviews on campus. The members of the screening committee should visit the prospective candidate's home town and interview his colleagues, his previous Board, service clubs he belonged to, labor and business leaders he dealt with, etc.

7. There is no perfect technique for selecting a community college president; only time, money and energy spent on screening and researching the candidates will pay real dividends. It is better to make extensive inquiry at this point than to later bemoan one's fate for making a poor choice.

8. Mutual confidence and cooperation between the various college elements participating in the selection is absolutely necessary during the entire process. A prior written policy which spells out the ground rules provides the best means of accomplishing this cooperation.

9. The candidate's desire for the position and awareness of the task he would be embarking upon is just as important as the Board's desire for the candidate. Every effort should be made to have the candidate visit the campus and interact with all of its segments. He should also investigate the college image within the community it serves. Additionally, he should be prepared to ask specific questions of the faculty and staff, and especially the Board, during the interviews.

The candidate should also have his wife accompany him if at all possible. Not only will the Board wish to interview her in most instances but she should determine if the community and the college itself are compatible with her particular needs, desires, etc. A president with a disgruntled wife or family will be less than totally committed to his professional responsibilities. Finally, the candidate should be certain he wants the position. It borders on the unethical to encourage a college into expending a great deal of time, effort and money if the applicant is applying only to satisfy various ulterior motives.

10. A copy of the institution's latest self-evaluation study and a copy of the accreditation committee's confidential evaluation report on the college should be sent to the candidates to be interviewed. Not only would they want knowledge of the college prior to the interview but the college itself would want to make it clear to the candidate that this would be the type of college he must administer. Therefore, there would be no illusions regarding the job duties and responsibilities by either party. As a corollary, the criterion developed for the position of president should be directly related to the required personal experience and qualifications of the candidate.

II. Suggested Duties of the Screening Committee

The screening committee should be formed prior to the preparation of criteria for the position and should be involved in the development of the criteria. These broad criteria should include (1) experience in a community college, (2) an earned doctorate or equivalent experience, (3) successful administrative experience, and (4) the ability of the person to successfully project the image of the particular college. Once the committee has developed the criteria and they have been approved by the Board, the screening committee should actually prepare the brochures and make decisions where they should be sent. Normally they would be disseminated to university placement offices in the geographical area, university education departments with community college programs and community colleges in the same general region.

Concurrent with the brochure preparation, the committee should also establish a time line for the process. This would include the date for issuing the vacancy announcement, the deadline for accepting applications, the time devoted to the screening process, the date for notifying all applicants regarding their status and inviting the finalists for personal interviews, and the general dates allotted for conducting the interviews. The selection of the final interview applicants is usually made within 6 weeks following the application submittal deadline.

Subsequent to the preparation of a time line, the committee must develop a system to handle the applications for the position. It is suggested that a confidential secretary of the committee be involved and responsible for the initial handling of all applications. The applications could be numbered in individual folders so the committee members could read and rate the candidates in accordance with the preestablished criteria. After the members have reviewed the credentials and prepared their ratings, a series of group meetings could reduce the field down to approximately 20. Then the 20 semifinalists would be reprocessed and narrowed down to the number requested by the Board for final interviews. A listing, in alphabetical order, of the finalists is then presented to the Board for further action.

Another duty of the committee would be to appoint a hospitality subcommittee to organize plans for the campus visitations by the selected finalists. These plans would include the campus tour, accommodations for the candidate and his wife, meals, allotted time for faculty, classified staff and student gatherings with each candidate, transportation, visits to other areas of the community, etc.

If it is financially feasible, the screening committee should employ the services of a consultant to assist them with the various duties outlined above. The consultant can save much wasted time and effort and can serve to keep the committee operating in a professional manner as they carry out their assigned duties. It is also quite possible that many of the candidates may be known personally by the consultant and he can contribute meaningfully to the screening deliberations, especially in reducing the 20 semifinalists to the desired number of finalists. Such a consultant is almost mandatory when the college is hiring its first

president or when the Board, faculty and administration have had little experience in the process. He also serves a valuable mediating role if there is much internal pressure between the Board and faculty or between the faculty and the incumbent president.

III. Action by the Board of Trustees

The Board should study in depth the applications submitted to the screening committee under the leadership of the Board chairman who has participated in the total screening procedure. If new names are subsequently being considered by the Board, they should be submitted to the screening committee before any definitive action is taken. After deliberations, the Board must then determine the number of applicants to be invited to the campus. It is recommended that no more than 5 be invited since the cost to the college becomes prohibitive for the value of return.

The next major task of the Board would be to thoroughly investigate the selected candidates prior to their campus visitations. This investigation should be conducted by 2-3 persons and include at least one of the faculty representatives from the screening committee. It should encompass a discussion about the finalist with such groups as his peers, service club groups, local news media, community leaders and others who have had professional contacts with the candidate. If financial restrictions prohibit actual off-campus visitation by this 3-man subcommittee, a telephone inquiry should at least be performed. Again, consultants are often helpful in their knowledge of selected finalists and the needs of the college.

IV. Visits of Candidates to the Campus

One full day, and preferably two, should be spent on the campus by each finalist. The candidate should be given the tour and be allowed the opportunity for interchange with all segments of the college staff, both professional and classified.

The Board of Trustees should also carry out a formal interview with the candidate. A separate informal interview with the candidate's wife is also suggested. The formal interview should be between 1-2 hours in length and a series of structured questions related to the criterion developed by the screening committee should be asked for each finalist. The Board chairman should conduct the session. The other Board members can then ask questions which emerge from the structured questions. A written transcript of the interview should be made and be available for perusal by the Board members and members of the screening committee. The candidate should be encouraged to ask questions concerning the college and expect to receive a frank and honest answer. An informal social hour and a dinner should be held with the candidate, his wife and the Board. The informal atmosphere of this occasion will assist the Board in becoming better acquainted with the candidate. Finally, if the candidate favorably impresses the Board, an attempt should be made to determine whether he would accept the position as President if it were offered to him.

These guidelines are not meant to be definitive, final answers nor are they guaranteed to insure that the final selection will invariably be the right person for the position. They do, however, represent the frustrating experiences of many others who have made serious blunders and have paid the full measure of a poor selection. Again, if a policy for selecting a future president can be drawn up in a cooperative venture by all involved parties in time when objective detachment will allow the most acceptable compromise, the implementation of that policy at some future time to select a new person to occupy the office of community college president should, in all probability, proceed more smoothly and harmoniously. An end result will be mutual agreement on the best man for the job and an attitude of cooperation and facilitation with the transition of the new administration rather than suspicion, mistrust and bitterness.

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